

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 22nd June, 2021

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Smyth (In the Chair);
Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors Black, Bunting, de Faoite, Flynn, Magee,
McAteer, McCusker and Mulholland.

In attendance: Mrs. C. Taggart, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mrs. G. O'Hare, Community Development Officer;
Mrs. L. McLernon, Democratic Services Officer; and
Ms. K. McCrum, Democratic Services Officer.

External attendance:

Belfast Youth Forum: Lucy Flannery (Vice Chair);
Tobi Adegoye;
John Kane;
Luke Patterson; and
Carter Wickham.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of the Councillors Cobain, Baker, Michael Collins, Corr, Garrett, M. Kelly, McReynolds, Newton, Pankhurst and Verner.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were recorded.

Belfast Youth Forum Agenda

The Committee was advised that representatives from the Belfast Youth Forum were in attendance to provide an update in relation to the work of the Forum.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, welcomed the representatives to the meeting.

'Heads Up' Mental Health Advocacy Toolkit – Carter Wickham

A representative of the Belfast Youth Forum (BYF) presented their 'Heads Up' Mental Health Advocacy Toolkit, which had been developed in partnership between BYF, NI Youth Forum and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), and launched in February, 2021.

He explained that the toolkit had been designed to help and support young people to take action and campaign on local mental health issues, and had come about as a result of the 'Elephant in the Room' and 'Still Waiting' reports.

The 4 key steps in organising a campaign were outlined, as was the importance of mental health self-care. The Committee was advised that the toolkit also included a number of key facts about mental health and a wide variety of resources and activities to support groups on their campaign journey.

The Members of the Committee commended the development of the Toolkit, noting the additional stress and pressures that had emerged as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need to help both young people and adults articulate how they were feeling.

In response to questions about where the toolkit had been circulated, and what, if any, feedback had been received, the representative advised that copies had been circulated to various other forums, as well as individuals who had shown an interest, and was targeted towards youth groups and leaders, schools, the community and voluntary sector, as well as politicians.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager advised that feedback and information from groups and schools using the toolkit to manage their own campaigns would be used to inform the future work of the Forum, as well as to respond to the current 'call for evidence' as part of the Belfast Agenda review.

Following discussion, the Members of the Committee recommended that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to note the overview on the 'Heads Up' Mental Health advocacy toolkit which was launched on 18th February 2021.

'Minor Choices, Major Voices' Research – Tobi Adegoye

A Youth Forum representative provided an overview of the results received from recent research looking at the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic young people living in Belfast, titled 'Minor Choices, Major Voices'. She advised that over the past 2 years, members of the diversity sub-group had been involved in a number of visits and activities in order to better inform themselves on issues such as migration, immigration, refugee status, ethnicity, racism, culture, diversity and religion.

The Members of the Committee were advised that, whilst it had been their intention to gather information via face to face focus groups, Covid-19 related restrictions required the survey to move online, and despite widespread promotion, just 23 responses were received.

She confirmed that the survey featured four main themes: a sense of belonging, community safety, school life, and, changes you would like to see, and that the findings were being analysed by Forum members and Dr. Byrne at the University of Ulster. Some initial data for the survey was presented:

- 39% of respondents were male, 57% were female and 4% preferred not to say;
- 46% stated that they followed Islam/Muslim beliefs, 26% followed Catholic beliefs, with the remaining categories split evenly (4%) between Protestant, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, none, and those who preferred not to say;
- 44% described their ethnic background as Black African, 9% as black other, 9% as South Asian, 9% Filipino and 9% mixed ethnic heritage;
- 96% stated that they were in full time education;

- 91% of people stated that they expressed their culture through what they eat, 65% through faith, beliefs and practices and 61% through their spoken language;
- 70% felt that there were some opportunities in Belfast to express in a positive way their culture and tradition, 13% felt there were no opportunities and 4% felt there were a lot of opportunities i.e. Culture Night, Belfast Mela;
- 61% felt that there were opportunities within the community to contribute to the decision-making processes that effected their lives;
- 83% stated that if given the opportunity in the future, they would leave Belfast/Northern Ireland to live in another country. Reasons for this included:
 - Feeling that they were not welcome and feeling like an outsider, despite being born here;
 - Not having the same opportunities in Belfast as in other countries;
 - Being at a disadvantage in securing employment due to the colour of their skin;
- When asked what kind of place they wanted Belfast to be in the future, responses included:
 - A more accepting place which doesn't revolve around the conflict of Protestants and Catholics and rather the various ethnicities and cultures;
 - A place where I don't have to think if my outfit or general appearance will cause me to be subject to prejudice;
 - A lively and accepting place that has a focus on being progressive;
 - Somewhere that all nationalities can feel welcomed and feel free to walk anywhere without the fear of racism.

The representative advised that this would be just the first step in exploring the topic of diversity in Belfast and that it was hoped that the next cohort of Belfast Youth Forum members would supplement this research with some face to face focus groups in order to gather more in-depth qualitative data, with the ultimate aim of making Belfast a welcoming, safe and tolerant city for all young people, regardless of race or religion.

The Members of the Committee welcomed the research and suggested that, even with limited responses, it highlighted the challenges facing the city in terms of inclusivity for those from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Discussion ensued regarding the concerning number of young people who did not feel that they belonged, or were welcome in Belfast, and how diversity could be supported and celebrated. It was pointed out that many cultural events were focused towards families, and that perhaps events specifically for young people were lacking. The role of education in reducing racism and ignorance and was considered, as was parental influence.

The Members of the Committee and Youth Forum also discussed the benefits of presenting the information to Belfast's Policing and Community Safety Partnerships ((D)PCSPs), and whether it would be possible for BYF members to be represented on the Partnerships. The Neighbourhood Services Manager agreed to explore the options available through the PCSP governance mechanisms alongside the Good Relations Manager, whilst asking that the Members remain mindful of the workload of the Youth Forum volunteers.

Following further discussion, the Members of the Committee recommended that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to:

- Note progress in relation to the current research undertaken by Belfast Youth Forum around diversity in Belfast, newly titled 'Minor Choices, Major Voices'.
- Recommend that the research is presented to the Belfast (D)PCSPs.
- Recommend that consideration is given to how the Belfast Youth Forum could become involved in the (D)PCSPs.

Youth Champions – Luke Patterson

The representative suggested that, while the Belfast Youth Forum was recognised as an important part of Belfast City Council's youth structures and that this had been further strengthened by the joint People and Communities Committee and BYF meetings, members felt there was further potential to improve communications and cooperation between Councillors, officers and the Forum.

He therefore brought forward the suggestion that each political party nominate a representative to take a leadership role in working and engaging with the Youth Forum on issues and/or motions which relate to young people.

A number of the Members of the Committee spoke in support of the suggestion, and commented that, at times, Councillors had not communicated with the Forum as effectively as they could have. It was also suggested that learning from the Older Persons Reference Group and their use of champions could be considered, as well as intergenerational work.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager confirmed that, if agreed, staff would develop Terms of Reference to support the champion role, in consultation with the Members, and that nominations would be managed through Party Group Leaders.

The Members of the Committee recommended that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to recommend that each Political Party in Belfast City Council nominate a 'Youth Champion' who could liaise with Belfast Youth Forum on motions and matters relating to youth in the city as a mechanism to aid communication between Elected Members and BYF members.

Rebranding – Lucy Flannery

The representative asked the Members of the Committee to consider a proposal to rebrand the Belfast Youth Forum to become 'Belfast City Youth Council', in order to provide a better linkage and connection with Belfast City Council, subject to all legal issues and implications being agreed.

She advised that, with the emergence of several youth forums in the city which are organised at a neighbourhood level, BYF had the potential to make its position at a city level more distinct, in much the same way as the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly had recently done.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager added that the timeframe for the change would be aligned to the autumn recruitment of the new members, and include a communications plan which would credit the campaigns undertaken by the Belfast Youth Forum in the past.

A Member of the Committee suggested that the rebranding and recruitment offered the opportunity to arrange a celebration event in order to promote the previous work of the Belfast Youth Forum, subject to Covid-19 restrictions. The Neighbourhood Services Manager advised that, if agreed, this could be built into the recruitment plan, and involve outgoing and new members, the Committee and Youth Champions, if so nominated by this stage.

The Members of the Committee recommended that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to:

- Recommend that Belfast Youth Forum rebrand to become 'Belfast City Youth Council' in order to provide a better linkage and connection with Belfast City Council.
- Agree that a Covid-19 compliant celebration event is organised alongside the rebranding and recruitment campaign to promote the previous work of the Belfast Youth Forum.

Belfast Youth Forum Recruitment – Lucy Flannery

The Committee was reminded that, at the January 2020 Special People and Communities Committee meeting, it had been agreed that the BYF recruitment process would be amended to begin in September and end in October in line with the academic year.

Furthermore, at the August 2020 meeting of the People and Communities Committee, it had been agreed that the term of the existing BYF members would be extended for another year, to end in September 2021, due to the impact of Covid-19.

The Youth Forum representative provided information on the District Electoral Areas represented by BYF members, and outlined their hope that the incoming members would be a representative group of young people from the city, not just geographically, but to include a diverse range of religions, races, genders, and sexualities, as well as those with disabilities, so that all young people could feel that they have representatives who are championing their voices with decision makers. Elected Members were asked to promote the recruitment drive within their electoral areas, and encourage as many young people as possible to apply.

The Members of the Committee recommended that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to note the time frame for the stand down of the current 2018-2021 Youth Forum and the recruitment of new 2021-2023 Youth Forum.

Transgender Community Support – Carter Wickham

A Youth Forum representative explained that the BYF were committing to actively better understand the issues affecting transgender young people and to liaise with the incoming members on creating an engagement plan which would set out how all future campaigns would actively seek to ensure that the voices of all young people were heard, including those of the transgender community.

He advised the Members of the Committee that the only Gender Identity Clinic in Northern Ireland, Brackenburn, had reached capacity in 2018 at which point it had stopped accepting new patients, and, whilst the clinic had recently resumed services, the wait times were reported to be in the region of 4-5 years.

He explained that high levels of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts were reported within the trans community and that the lack of access to appropriate healthcare was directly linked to suicide rates. He added that the current system was effectively denying a section of the community access to public services and support. He therefore called on the Council to actively involve the transgender community in research, consultations and proposals going forward.

A number of the Members of the Committee voiced their disappointment and frustration that, as health services were resuming post Covid-19, there appeared to be little progress at the Brackenburn Clinic, and agreed that this was an important priority. The Members discussed how best to support trans rights, and support the campaign for equality and equity in terms of public services. A Member also made reference to funding provided by Belfast City Council to the Belfast Trans Resource Centre during the pandemic in order to support counselling services.

Discussion took place regarding the need to eliminate ignorance through education, the need to understand others' experience and to provide an accepting society. A Member referenced a Department of Education report which had reviewed the experience of trans young people in schools, suggesting that LGB&T young people had the support of their peers, but often it was teachers and school policies that acted as barriers to how they wished to represent, for example, through uniform policies and changing facilities.

The Members of the Committee discussed the detrimental impact that negative experiences could have on mental ill health and suicide amongst the trans community, and suggested that, whilst the Council did not have a role in wider health care issues, they did have a role to play in the visibility of public services and having a positive impact on communities.

The Community Development Officer added that one of the recommendations from within the Youth Forum's 'Any Use' report into relationship and sexuality education (RSE) in Belfast, was that rather than schools selecting the topics that they wished to cover within RSE, that there would be a standardised approach requiring schools to cover certain topics to ensure that young people were aware, and were given the opportunity to discuss different aspects of RSE. Also, the report suggested that rather than bringing in external agencies, qualified teachers were used to deliver the programme, again to ensure standardisation of delivery.

A Member confirmed that he had written to the Education Minister regarding the 'Any Use' report, asking for its recommendations to be reviewed, and asking whether commitment would be forthcoming for common core RSE. He noted also that the issue had recently been raised in the Northern Ireland Assembly, as the topic had been raised within the recommendations of the Gillen review. He advised that he would provide an update to a future meeting once he received a response.

The Members of the Committee recommended that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to recommend that the Committee engage in a preliminary discussion with BYF members on how Belfast can work to become a more progressive and inclusive city for the Transgender community.

Date of next Meeting

As this was the final joint meeting of the current Belfast Youth Forum members, prior to the recruitment drive in September, the Members of the Committee thanked the young people for their excellent work over the past 3 years. Likewise, members of the BYF thanked the Committee for allowing the Forum the opportunity to present on a wide range of topics and for engaging in important conversations.

The Community Development Officer was also thanked for her contributions to the Forum in her time working in the post.

The Members of the Committee noted that the next Special Joint meeting was scheduled to be held on Tuesday, 5th October at 5.15 p.m.

Chairperson